

However, the book is clearly written for the general reader rather than the keen birder – they are, after all, a much larger market. The initial Birding-Aus postings of 2002 were written for an audience that understood what he was doing, while the book seeks to explain why anybody would have such a passion. I believe the book achieves this aim admirably.

My recommendation? Buy the book by all means. Dooley definitely needs the royalties now that he has squandered the family fortune. If you are a serious birder how-

ever, go back to the postings in the Birding-Aus archives. It is there that you will find the raw passion, the determination to succeed, the despondency that comes with dips, and the unalloyed pleasure of finding that long-sought-for species.

Congratulations Sean on producing such an enjoyable book.

David Geering

Regent Honeyeater Recovery Coordinator
Department of Environment & Conservation
PO Box 2111, Dubbo NSW 2830

Snakes, Lizards and Frogs of the Victorian Mallee

by Michael Swan and
Simon Watharow

(illustrations by Rachael Hammond)

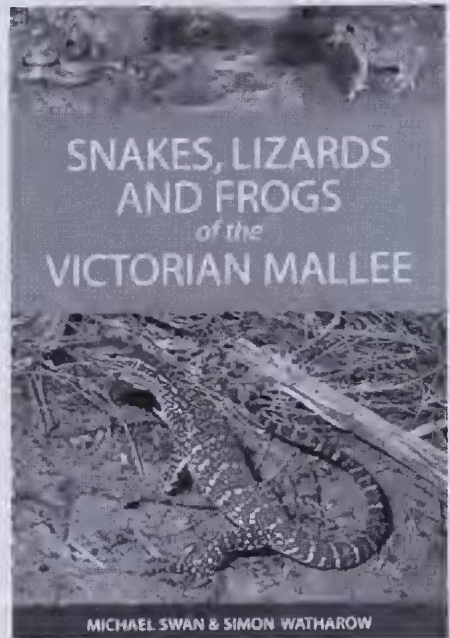
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Most of us are probably aware that the Victorian Mallee is endowed with an abundance of reptiles. Those of us lucky enough to venture into this area at the right time of year have probably seen a Bearded Dragon basking on a fencepost, a Stumpy-tailed Lizard strolling across a track or a Brown Snake melting into the undergrowth. We are perhaps less aware that three species of frogs occur in true Mallee habitat (spending much of their lives aestivating underground), and several others occur in aquatic habitats that penetrate or delimit this region. The sheer diversity of reptiles and frogs in the Mallee make it a rewarding destination for herpetologists, and an interesting diversion for those who might be enjoying the springtime wildflowers. These animals are showcased in a new fieldguide, *Snakes, Lizards and Frogs of the Victorian Mallee*.

The book commences with a foreword by John Coventry, Emeritus Curator of Herpetology, Museum Victoria, and a person with a long association with the her-



petofauna of the Mallee. John provides a neat summary of the reason for the herpetological diversity of the Victorian Mallee – it is a transitional zone between the mesic Bassian zoogeographic region of south-eastern Australia and xeric Eyrean zoogeographic region. This means that the fauna of the Mallee has representatives from both zoogeographic regions, and is further enriched by the intrusion of the Murray-Darling river system, which delivers some species from the Torresian zoogeographic region. The result of this confluence of faunas is the wonderful herpetological richness of the Mallee.

Coventry's foreword also touches on something that is self-evident in these kinds of books – they arise from the incredible passion and dedication of their authors. Both Swan and Watharow have a fondness that borders on obsession for the Mallee, and particularly for its reptiles and frogs. For many years they have undertaken self-funded expeditions to survey, research, photograph and generally enjoy these animals.

Of course a book such as this requires input from people other than the authors, and two contributions are worthy of particular mention. Peter Robertson (another veteran Mallee herpetofauna researcher) provides numerous spectacular photographs. His images of snakes, which are notoriously difficult photography subjects, are especially noteworthy. Peter's photographs are complemented by lovely images from others, including both authors. A stand-out feature of this book is the illustrations by Rachael Hammond. Technical diagrams of reptiles are not easy to do well (imagine drawing the tiny scales on the underside of a gecko's foot!). However, Hammond's artwork is impressive, and adds immense value to the book.

Following an introduction to the region that includes a history of the area, threats to Mallee habitats, and a description of the major reserves, the book is divided into the eight families of reptiles and frogs that occur in Victorian Mallee habitats. An introduction to each family is followed by detailed species accounts that include a description of their habitat and diet, reproductive information and conservation status. A regional distribution map and the means to differentiate between species accompany this information. This differentiation is made possible by use of a species-specific diagnostic table. The authors have deliberately steered clear of dichotomous keys, which can be difficult for the novice to use effectively.

An interesting dilemma for the authors was how to deal with the numerous species

that occur in the Mallee area, but do not generally occur in true Mallee habitats. This is dealt with in the final major section of the book, titled 'Victorian Mallee fringe-dwellers'. This section provides a photograph and brief description of animals such as Broad-shelled Turtles, Tiger Snakes, Tree Goannas and Growling Grass Frogs, species whose distributions extend into the region, often in association with rivers, but which rarely occur in true Mallee habitats.

I am a fan of regional field guides. The larger (and more expensive) national field guides to Australia's reptiles and frogs contain so many species that trying to single out the nondescript skink you spy beside the trail can be a daunting, and often unsuccessful, exercise. By virtue of considering a limited geographic area, regional guides consider a much smaller number of species, and need to consider far less diagnostic features. They also generally cost less, and are of a more convenient size for carrying in the field.

I believe that no fieldguide concerned with Australian reptiles is adequate unless it provides information on modern snakebite First Aid. Swan and Watharow include this information, but go one step better. They provide a section on dealing with snakes around the home, reflecting the wisdom gained by Watharow during the countless snake removals he has conducted over the years. Other useful inclusions are a glossary and relevant reference list.

This is an attractive book with few faults that will appeal to herpetologists and anyone wanting to enrich their natural history experience when enjoying this beautiful part of Victoria.

Nick Clemann

Arthur Rylah Institute for Environmental Research
Department of Sustainability and Environment
PO Box 137, Heidelberg, Victoria 3084